

Message Text

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SUBJ: TRIAL OF "THAMMASAT 18" RESUMES

REF: BANGKOK 29878

SUMMARY: TRIAL OF "THAMMASAT 18" RESUMED JANUARY 9, WITH TESTIMONY FROM FIRST OF AN EXPECTED 80 WITNESSES FOR THE PRESECUTION. DEFENDANTS, REPRESENTED BY DEFENSE ATTORNEYS, APPEARED HEALTHY AND IN GOOD SPIRITS. FUTURE COURTROOM SESSIONS SCHEDULED FOR EACH MONDAY IN JANUARY. END SUMMARY.

1. THREE JUDGES PRESIDING OVER A SPECIAL MILITARY COURT BEGAN ON JAN. 10, TO HEAR TESTIMONY FROM THE FIRST OF SOME 80 WITNESSES FOR THE PROSECUTION IN THE TRIAL OF 18 FORMER STUDENTS AND ACTIVISTS FACING CHARGES, INCLUDING COMMUNIST ACTIVITY AND LESE MAJESTE, IN CONNECTION WITH THE VIOLENCE AT BANGKOK'S THAMMASAT UNIVERSITY ON OCTOBER 6, 1976. THE TESTIMONY OF THE FIRST WITNESS, POLICE COLONEL SAKHON SUWANNA, DEALT WITH THE ACTIVITIES OF THE NATIONAL STUDENT CENTER OF THAILAND (NSCT) FROM 1969 TO 1976. THE PROCEEDINGS WERE SLOW-PACED, OWING TO LIMITED OFFICIAL USE

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THE TRADITION THAT THAI JUDGES THEMSELVES MAINTAIN A WRITTEN RECORD OF THE TESTIMONY, AS A RESULT, THE COURT HEARD JUST ONE WITNESS DURING THE ENTIRE DAY'S PROCEEDINGS. DEFENSE LAWYERS WILL HAVE AN OPPORTUNITY TO CROSS EXAMINE THE WITNESS AT THE NEXT TRIAL SESSION ON JAN. 16 (COURTROOM SESSIONS ARE SCHEDULED FOR EACH MONDAY IN JANUARY - THE SCHEDULE FOR FEBRUARY IS NOT YET FIRM, BUT MAY INCLUDE HEARINGS TWICE WEEKLY).

2. THE LEGAL DEFENSE FOR THE "THAMMASAT 18" IS BEING PREPARED BY A TEAM OF 47 LAWYERS, INCLUDING SEVERAL OF THAILAND'S BETTER KNOWN ATTORNEYS. THE CHIEF LEGAL ADVISOR TO THE DEFENSE TEAM IS MR. MARUT BUNNAG, A WELL RESPECTED INTERNATIONAL LAWYER AND PAST CHAIRMAN OF THE LAWYERS' ASSOCIATION OF THAILAND. CO-ORDINATOR FOR THE DEFENSE OF THE "THAMMASAT 18" AND CHIEF SPOKESMAN AT THE TRIAL IS MR. THONGBAI THONGPAO, KNOWN WIDELY AS AN ACTIVIST FOR SOCIAL CAUSES.

3. THE MODERN COURTROOM FACILITY, RENOVATED ESPECIALLY FOR THE "THAMMASAT 18" TRIAL, ACCOMMODATED AN ESTIMATED 300 PERSONS, INCLUDING DIPLOMATIC REPRESENTATIVES (UK, AUSTRALIA, SWEDEN, NEW ZEALAND, WEST GERMANY, FRANCE, AND THE USSR, AS WELL AS THE US), THE DEFENDANTS' RELATIVES, LOCAL NEWS REPORTERS, AND OTHER OBSERVERS. UNLIKE THE FIRST TRIAL SESSION LAST SEPT. 5, FOREIGN NEWS CORRESPONDENTS DID NOT COVER THE TRIAL SESSION. PHOTOGRAPHS WERE NOT PERMITTED INSIDE THE COURTROOM.

4. AN ENTHUSIASTIC CROWD OF ABOUT 3,000 YOUTHFUL SUPPORTERS OF THE "THAMMASAT 18", WAVING SMALL RED, BLUE AND WHITE THAI FLAGS, GATHERED OUTSIDE THE COURTROOM TO LISTEN TO THE TRIAL PROCEEDINGS, WHICH WERE BROADCAST LIVE OVER A PUBLIC ADDRESS SYSTEM. ACROSS THE STREET, ANOTHER, SMALLER GROUP OF YOUNG PEOPLE, NUMBERING ABOUT 200, STAGED A PEACEFUL COUNTER-DEMONSTRATION, ACCUSING THE DEFENDANTS OF TREASON AND DISLOYALTY TO THE LIMITED OFFICIAL USE

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MONACHRY. A SECURITY FORCE OF SOME 300 THAI MILITARY AND POLICE OFFICERS MAINTAINED A WATCHFUL EYE THROUGHOUT THE DAY. THERE WAS NO VIOLENCE.

COMMENT: THE MOOD WITHIN THE COURTROOM WAS RELAXED, WITH DEFENDANTS, DEFENSE AND PROSECUTION ATTORNEYS, AND JUDGES BEHAVING IN ACCORDANCE WITH THE RULES OF THE COURT. THE DEFENDANTS, DRESSED COMFORTABLY IN SPORT SHIRTS AND SHORT PANTS, APPEARED HEALTHY AND IN GOOD SPIRITS. BEFORE THE TRIAL SESSION BEGAN, ONE OF THE DEFENDANTS, SUTHAM SAENG-PRATHUM, DISTRIBUTED SMALL BOUQUETS OF PAPER FLOWERS TO FOREIGN DIPLOMATIC OBSERVERS AS A SIGN OF APPRECIATION FOR THE INTERNATIONAL ATTENTION WHICH HAS BEEN FOCUSED ON THE CASE. WHITEHOUSE

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